Abstract
Health professionals need to be better prepared for the genetics revolution, says Maggie Kirk.

The completion of the first draft of the human genome marks a significant achievement to decipher the 'book of humanity'. However, it is important to recognise that this represents only a milestone; there is much work still to be done.

Not only must scientists identify the genes implicated in disease from the three billion chemical bases that make up our genome, but they must also learn how these genes interact with the environment and with each other so that treatments can be designed to correct the causes of disease.

While knowing the full picture may be 40 to 50 years away, nurses and midwives cannot afford to be complacent. These advances are having an impact on practice now. The ability to detect genes associated with the development of common disorders precedes the ability to treat such conditions.

The list of identified genes is growing steadily, and it is a short step between identifying a gene and developing a test. Nurses should be asking who will support individuals predicted as being 'at risk' of developing a disease? Who should have access to genetic testing? What should we test for? What questions should we be asking about the application of new knowledge and new technologies? The genetics revolution is already upon us - but how many health professionals are really aware of the implications for practice and for society?

Our research in the Genomics Policy Unit indicates that health professionals are not prepared adequately in genetics to deal with the existing needs of patients and families, and we are continuing to look at ways in which this may be addressed.